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UNCLAS DUSHANBE 001878

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SUBJECT: EVERYTHING'S COMING UP COTTON IN TURSONZODA, TAJIKISTAN

1. In a series of meetings November 25, government officials, farmers and a businessman were universally--and surprisingly--positive about the economic and political situation in Tursonzoda. The Dushanbe-appointed Chairman of the City Administration Barakatullo Akhmedov emphasized there were "no real problems" in the city or district, and demurred to discuss all but the most benign issues.

2. Located 53 kilometers west of Dushanbe, Tursonzoda does enjoy higher rates of employment and consistent electricity, unlike many other Tajik cities, thanks to Central Asia's only aluminum smelter, TadAZ. TadAZ is a cash cow that the government makes sure has sufficient power, with a nice spillover effect for Tursonzoda. Akhmedov told Poloff 90 percent of district homes have running water (despite Poloff observing people carrying water buckets in the streets.) Although nationally, Tajikistan's cotton harvest appears to be well below anticipated yields, in Tursonzoda, Akhmedov claimed they reached at least 90 percent of the expected harvest. Residents from three border districts freely enter and exit Uzbekistan with no problems. The central government provides Tursonzoda with adequate funds for schools. "We are normalizing," Akhmedov noted. "Tajikistan is a young democracy, but look how fast we are catching up!" He cited the proliferation of mobile phones and the thriving small markets as examples of economic progress.

3. (COMMENT: Local Embassy staff noted that Tursonzoda is actually considered a good place to live, after Dushanbe, particularly because the television from Uzbekistan is a higher-quality, albeit another state-supported propaganda machine. END COMMENT.)

4. In a separate meeting, Turgunali Abdulloyev, chief of Abdurahmonov farm, gave an upbeat assessment of Tursonzoda's agricultural situation. Despite the presence of heavy industry, district farmers traditionally enjoyed higher yields due to better soil and climate. In Soviet times Tursonzoda produced many "heroes of agriculture." Unlike in most cotton-growing regions, Abdulloyev alleged farmers carry very little debt. The government did not pressure farmers to grow cotton, but cotton proved more profitable than other crops. "There is no market for other things," he noted.

5. Abdulloyev echoed Akhmedov's claims that most of the region had running water, electricity and paved roads. Because of the smelter and strong agriculture base, fewer district residents worked in Russia; in fact, workers from other parts of Tajikistan came to Tursonzoda for temporary work. (NOTE: TadAZ is estimated to employ 13,000 workers, in a city of around 60,000. END NOTE.)

6. Abdurakhim Rakhimov, owner of a privatized porcelain factory, observed that while his outfit produced only for the domestic market, few porcelain factories in the world are profitable these days. He described the business climate in Tursonzoda as encouraging. Cheaper, better quality porcelain from neighboring China was beginning to push his products out of the market, but he thought he could turn a profit by changing production from tea sets to isolators for power stations. Trade with Afghanistan offered possibilities, but 70-90% import taxes prevented commerce with Uzbekistan from growing beyond the small traders carrying things to local markets on either side of the border.

7. Rakhimov's factory still carried debt from the privatization processes. His single complaint focused on the high taxes in Tajikistan and other CIS countries. "Too high for such weak economies," he sighed. Corruption was not a problem, he maintained. Oh really? pressed Poloff. The government had done a lot for stability, he argued, and Tajikistan had no issues with corruption.

PASS THE KOOLAID-WE'LL HAVE SOME, TOO

8. COMMENT: Even the most nationalistic pro-government Tajik citizen will usually acknowledge some problems, or express frustration with the slow economic growth. Corruption is always a favorite topic, schools always need more funds and mentioning Uzbekistan can usually stir some sort of response in the most sanguine. The Stepford-like responses during all three meetings in Tursonzoda were puzzling. Tajik officials, even in the worst parts of the country, feel it their duty to tell EmbOffs that

all is rosy. What was unique was the same comments from  
business and agriculture. END COMMENT.  
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